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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001451

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SUBJECT: MILITARY IMPLICATIONS OF A GAZA PULL-OUT

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

1. (S) SUMMARY: We assess that the threshold for IDF conventional ground force action in Gaza following a complete Israeli withdrawal, including from the Philadelphia Strip, would be substantially elevated. The loss of IDF-secured roads, fortified bases and settlements, and diminished IDF tactical intelligence capabilities would create real obstacles that ground force commanders would be hesitant to confront. Moreover, the IDF would have to count on facing better-armed Palestinians than at present. In response to threats or provocations from Gaza, the IDF would almost certainly rely for as long as possible on standoff action, especially airstrikes. Special forces operations would be an intermediate step between standoff and ground force actions, but they would be hindered by many of the same obstacles as a ground invasion. (This judgment does not necessarily apply to Shin Bet operations, which would continue.) Events that would almost certainly trigger some form of IDF strike on Gaza include mega-terror attacks by Gaza-based Hamas or PIJ, or with some other clear connection to Gaza; the deployment from Gaza of standoff weapons with professional characteristics (e.g., Katyushas, SAMs, military-quality mortars) against targets in Israel; and, the revelation of a Karine-A-like smuggling operation.

Note: This is one of three messages by Embassy Tel Aviv with initial thinking about the implications of an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. The other two cables address the political/institutional and economic implications of withdrawal. END SUMMARY.

2. (S) Should the IDF withdraw completely from Gaza, including from the Philadelphia Strip along the Gaza-Egypt border, it would subsequently face significant obstacles to sending back ground forces. Ground force commanders would be highly reluctant to lead troops into Gaza without the assets they currently enjoy, notably pre-cleared routes of movement for attack and withdrawal, and fortified safe areas on bases and settlements within Gaza. Moreover, the good tactical intelligence that the IDF currently enjoys by virtue of its own eyes on the ground in Gaza would almost certainly be much weaker after a full withdrawal. Ground forces would also likely be inhibited by the prospect of facing opponents who, after a complete Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, would likely be better armed and organized.

3. (S) Based on these factors, the Embassy assesses that the threshold for IDF conventional ground operations in Gaza would be significantly elevated after withdrawal. Any conventional ground operation would almost certainly ensue only after repeated IDF attempts to deal with threats by standoff means, notably fixed wing and helicopter attacks. Another possible alternative to a ground campaign would be the use of IDF special operations units, but their deployment would be inhibited by the same factors militating against large-scale ground force operations. (This judgment does not necessarily apply to Shin Bet operations.) Nevertheless, the IDF would be likely to turn to special forces, perhaps inserted by sea, before resorting to any larger-scale ground operation.

4. (S) A full withdrawal from Gaza would remove, or at least significantly reduce, the stigma of occupation associated with IDF actions in Gaza. With a greater feeling of legitimacy to respond militarily to provocations from Gaza, the IDF will probably show less inhibition about undertaking operations likely to cause significant civilian casualties and other unintended effects. The effect of taking more risks of killing non-combatants would be compounded by the possible greater tendency of the IDF to resort to less precise air power following a full withdrawal from Gaza.

Reverse Tripwires

5. (S) The Embassy has identified the following events that would almost certainly trigger conventional (air or land) IDF action in Gaza. As noted above, we do not assess that a conventional land forces operation would be the first response in any case, except perhaps in the event of a Palestinian attack that far exceeded the number of casualties in any previous attack, or that employed nonconventional

means. This list, like those that follow, should not be considered exhaustive.

-- A mega-terror attack (at least 50-100 deaths) within the Green Line committed by Hamas, PIJ or other Gaza-based group, or with some other clear Gaza connection.

-- An attack into Israel, or against an Israeli plane, whether successful or not, from Gaza using standoff weapons with professional characteristics, e.g., Katyushas or similar SSMS, SAMs or (not homemade) mortars. The launch of such weapons into Israel, or against an Israeli plane, would likely provoke an IDF response, even without, or with few, Israeli casualties. An attack using unsophisticated standoff weapons of the kind already in use (Qassams, home-made mortars) would be unlikely to provoke an IDF response if it causes no fatalities. A "lucky hit" that causes fatalities with these imprecise weapons would probably trigger a standoff response, but not more.

-- The exposure of a large-scale arms smuggling operation, similar to the Karine-A, involving standoff weapons of professional characteristics.

16. (S) Actions more likely to provoke an IDF response would include:

-- A significant increase in the presence of Hizballah fighters, Iranian Revolutionary Guard forces, or al-Qaeda-associated operatives in Gaza.

-- Continuous, small-scale smuggling of the sorts of weapons described in para 5 above, as revealed by intelligence sources. Whether the IDF would respond to the presence, but non-use, of such weapons is uncertain. However, we assess the probability as very low that Palestinian groups would maintain Hizballah-like capabilities with Hizballah-like restraint. In other words, Palestinian groups would almost certainly not refrain from trying to deploy a new capability almost immediately against targets in Israel.

17. (S) Actions unlikely to provoke an IDF response, but that plausibly might do so, include:

-- The political ascent of Hamas.

-- A significant increase in terrorist penetration of the fence separating Gaza from Israel.

-- A series of attacks in Israel carried out by terrorists smuggled into Israel from Gaza via Egypt.

18. (S) Any combination of events from paras 6 and 7 would probably have an increased chance of provoking an Israeli response.

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